

Eschatological Laughter in a Christian Funerary Epigram from Late Antique Egypt

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In memoriam Stephen Mitchell: *Rideat in pace*

This article reexamines a late antique funerary epigram, possibly from Egypt. The presence of the verbs γελᾶω/γελῶ (laugh) and μειδιᾶω/μειδίω (smile) in this epigram, pertaining to the Christian martyrs and Jesus, makes this text exceptional, something that previous scholars have not so far recognized. It seems that neither a smiling Christ nor laughing martyrs are attested elsewhere in Christian epigraphy. Moreover, it is the only instance in Christian literature in which both Christ and the martyrs are described specifically as laughing or smiling when they meet, probably in heaven. By restudying this text and setting it in its historical context, our study highlights the importance of this epigraphical document regarding our knowledge of eschatological laughter in a broader context of the Greco-Roman world and late antique Christianity.

The History of the Stone

The stone on which the funerary epigram appears was purchased about 1900 by the German philologist Wilhelm Weissbrodt.¹ It is unclear where he

purchased it, as he collected objects from different regions, mostly from Egypt and Asia Minor. It is not entirely clear whether the stone was first brought to the State Academy of Braunsberg (today Braniewo) in northern Poland, or if it was transferred directly to Greifswald, Germany, by the archaeologist Erich Pernice.² This object bore the only Greek inscription available at the University of Greifswald, where Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf also taught for seven years.³ For that reason, it was used by the Austrian Josef Keil as an “indispensable teaching aid” to instruct young epigraphers how to create paper

Königlichen Akademie zu Braunsberg,” in *Verzeichnis der Vorlesungen an der Königlichen Akademie zu Braunsberg im Sommer-Semester 1913* (Braniewo, 1913), 3–22, at 3, claims he had been able to buy inscriptions since 1898. J. Keil, “Altchristliches Grabepigramm (Nr. 506),” in *Greifswalder Antiken: Gedächtnisgabe für Erich Pernice*, ed. E. Boehringer (Berlin, 1961), 130–32, at 130, probably mistakenly, has it as 1896.

2 See Keil, “Grabepigramm,” 130. On the academy, also called the Lyceum Hosianum, see Faensen, “Kabinett,” 61–64. Weissbrodt never traveled to the Mediterranean himself, so he used intermediaries. For a discussion of the collection at the academy, see Faensen, “Kabinett,” 74–75. Most of its inscriptions moved to Warsaw after World War II, such as the Zenonopolis inscription: P. Pilhofer, “A Martyr Who Keeps the Water Flowing: Sokrates and His Church at Isaurian Zenonopolis” (forthcoming).

3 Keil, “Grabepigramm,” 130. On Pernice, see J. Fischer, “Erich Pernice: Ein Leben zwischen Greifswald und Pompeji,” in *Altertumswissenschaft in Greifswald: Porträts ausgewählter Gelehrter 1856 bis 1946*, ed. S. Froehlich, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Universität Greifswald 14 (Stuttgart, 2021), 193–228.

1 Rostock, Heinrich Schliemann-Institut, Universität Rostock, Archäologische Studiensammlung der Universität Greifswald, inv. Gr506. For Weissbrodt, see B. Faensen, “Das ‘Antik-Archäologische Kabinett’ am ‘Lyceum Hosianum’ in Braunsberg (Braniewo): Aus der Geschichte der Altertumssammlung und des Lehrstuhls für Klassische Philologie einer Katholischen Hochschule im Ermland,” *Pegasus* 2 (2000): 61–87, at 64–69. W. Weissbrodt, “Griechische und lateinische Inschriften in der antik-archäologischen Sammlung der

squeezes. Keil was the first to publish the inscription.⁴ When the Institut für Altertumskunde in Greifswald closed in 2006, its archaeological collection, known as the Archäologische Studiensammlung, was loaned to the Heinrich Schliemann-Institut at the University of Rostock, where it is kept to this day.

Description and Discussion

The stone, shown in Figure 1, is made of yellowish limestone, and its provenance is not specified. Its dimensions are 44.5 × 40 × 5.5 cm, with its letters ranging from 0.7 to 1.2 cm in height. According to Keil, the original size of the slab might have been 83 × 44.5 cm. On one side (Fig. 1b), it shows an engraved, symmetrical, pattée-type cross with slightly concave arms within a circle and a laurel wreath. A small bead is attached to the middle of each arch, and the interstices are decorated with a stylized palm leaf design. It shows remains of red paint. On the other side, it bears an inscription in two columns (Fig. 1a). A vertical groove, painted red, separates the two inscribed columns and corresponds to the central axis of the cross that is engraved on the other side. The first column of the inscribed text consists of twenty-three partially preserved lines of a funerary poem in dactylic hexameter with one hexameter per line. Only some initial letters are preserved from the last twelve rows of the second column. The material of the stone—combined with the information about the acquisition by Weissbrodt—made both Keil and Manuel De Martino suggest that the stone most likely originated in Egypt. Keil dates the epigram, based on content, language, style, and letter form, to “after 400” and the cross to the late fifth century; based on the general similarities in style with the poetry of Nonnus of Panopolis, De Martino proposes a date in

4 Keil, “Grabepigramm,” 131. On Keil’s work at Greifswald, see H. Taeuber, “Josef Keil: Alte Geschichte im Gegenwind der Zeitgeschichte,” in Froehlich, *Altertumswissenschaft in Greifswald*, 313–25.

the second half of the fifth century, while more recently Gianfranco Agosti has opted for somewhere around the middle to end of the fifth century, based on paleography and the Nonnian style of the text in both meter and language (his main interest regarding the text).⁵ De Martino follows Keil in suggesting, in the same vague terms, that the stone might have functioned as a (chancel) screen that could have belonged either to a church or a funerary monument.⁶ Considering that both sides of the stone are symmetrically designed, preserve red paint, and show no evidence of change in use, reuse of a chancel screen for a grave monument or vice versa seems unlikely. The only option remaining is that the stone functioned as part of a funerary monument that would not have been part of the liturgical furnishings of a church.

With several editions and translations in existence already, we read the text from the stone:⁷

5 Keil, “Grabepigramm,” 132; M. De Martino “Dottrina e poesia in una iscrizione greca metrica dell’Egitto paleocristiano,” *RACr* 73 (1997): 413–23, at 415; and G. Agosti, “Les langues de l’épigramme épigraphique grecque: Regard sur l’identité culturelle chrétienne dans l’Antiquité tardive,” in *L’épigramme dans tous ses états: Épigraphiques, littéraires, historiques*, ed. E. Santin and L. Foschia (Lyon, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.enseditions.5833>; “Il est écrit dans le style nonnien, comme le montrent la métrique (tous les vers se terminent avec un paroxyton, du moins ceux qui sont lisibles) et le langage.”

6 Keil, “Grabepigramm,” 130 (“Schränkenplatte in einer Kapelle oder Coemeterienanlage”), 132 (“in einer Märtyrerkapelle beigesetzt wurde”); and De Martino, “Dottrina,” 422 (“Elemento divisorio in una cappella o in un’area cimiteriale”).

7 Editions and translations: Keil, “Grabepigramm,” 130–32, pl. 69; *SEG* 24.1243, 47.2148; De Martino, “Dottrina,” 413–23 (Italian translation and commentary); A. Ferrua, *La polemica antiariana nei monumenti paleocristiani* (Vatican City, 1991), 8 (only lines 19–23); G. Agosti, “Literariness and Levels of Style in Epigraphical Poetry of Late Antiquity,” *Ramus* 37.1–2 (2008): 191–213, at 196; G. Agosti, “Ancora sullo stile delle iscrizioni metriche tardoantiche,” *Incontri di filologia classica* 11 (2013): 233–52, at 242–43; and Agosti, “Langues” (French translation).

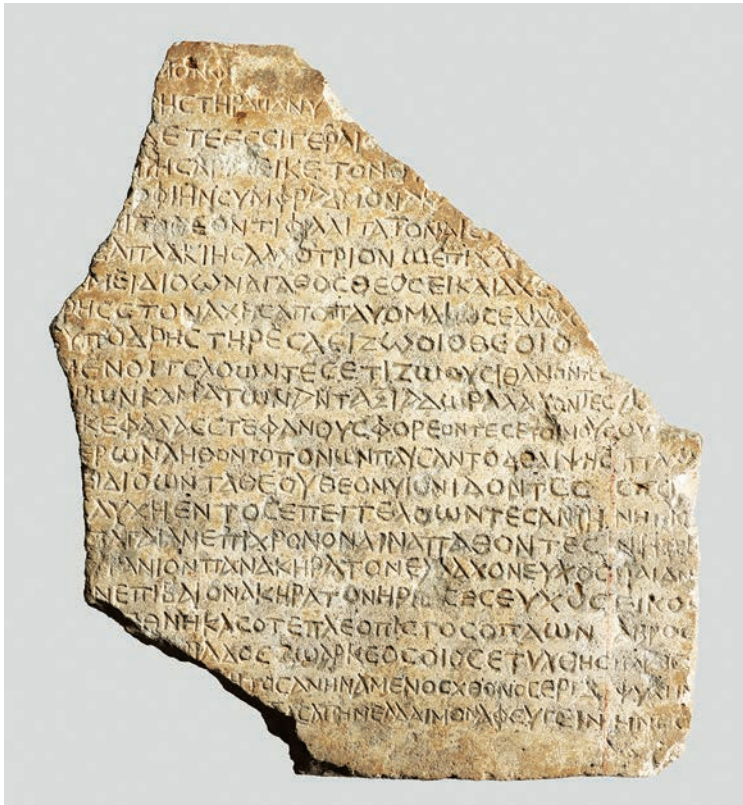


Fig. 1.
(a) The late antique epigram and (b) the incised cross on the other side of the stone, Archäologische Studiensammlung der Universität Greifswald, inv. Gr506 (currently kept at the Heinrich Schliemann-Institut, Rostock). Photo courtesy of the Heinrich Schliemann-Institut, Universität Rostock.



Column A

	[.....]μον φ[ιλ -----]	My beloved? . . .
	[..... ὑποδ]ρησθήρα πανυψ[ίστου βασιλῆος]	. . . a servant of the most high sovereign, mature
	[ἔργμασιν οὐ]δ' ἐτέεσσι γεραίο[ν ---]	in works rather than years . . .
	[.....]νίης ἀριδείκετον ὁ[---]	. . . illustrious . . .
5	[.....]σοφίην, συμφράδμονα κα[ι ---]	5 . . . wisdom, adviser . . .
	[..... ἐμ]οὶ ποθέοντι φιλαίτατον αἰὲν [ἐταῖρον],	. . . and [helper] to me. I constantly miss my dearest
	[σώματος] ἀπλακίης ἀλλότριον, ὃ ἐπιχαί[ρει]	companion,
	[φαιδρῶς] μειδιῶν ἀγαθὸς Θεός — εἰ καὶ ἀχεύ[ων],	a man alien to the sin of the body, at whom
	[λυπη]ρῆς στοναχῆς ἀποπαύομαι, ὡς ἐδιδάχ[θην].	the good God joyfully smiles and rejoices. —
10	[Ὡς γὰρ] ὑποδρηστήρες ἀειζῶοιο Θεοῖο	Even if I mourn,
	[θλιβέ]μενοι γελῶντες ἔτι ζῶουσι θανόντες	I cease my painful lament, as I was taught.
	[καὶ γοε]ρῶν καμάτων ἀντάξια δῶρα λαχόντες	10 [For] the servants of the immortal God,
	[ἤδη κάκ] κεφαλὰς στεφάνους φορέοντες ἐτοίμους	laughing in their distress, live on after they die.
	[τῶν μογ]ερῶν λήθοντο πόνων, παύσαντο δὲ δέψης	Having received gifts of value equal to their
15	[εὐνως μ]ειδιῶντα Θεοῦ Θεὸν υἱὸν ἰδόντες.	lamentable pains
	[θυμοῦ δ' ἐξ] αὐχέντος ἐπεγγελόντες ἀνίη	and wearing crowns prepared for their heads,
	[λυπηρῇ κα]τὰ γαίαν ἐπὶ χρόνον αἰνὰ παθόντες	they have already forgotten their grievous afflictions
	[χώρον ἀν' οὐ]ράνιον πανακήρατον ἔλλαχον εὐχος.	and have satisfied their thirst
	[ὥς σὺ καμῶ]ν ἐπὶ βαιὸν ἀκήρατον ἤρπασες εὐχος.	15 having seen God the Son of God smiling kindly.
20	[οὐ μὴν γὰρ τ]έθνηκας, ὅτ' ἔπλεο πιστὸς ὁπάων	With a proud soul despising their
	[τῆς Ἀγίας Τ]ριάδος ζωαρκέος οἶος ἐτύχθης	[grievous] pain, although they had suffered horribly
	[δοῦλος ἐὼν ἄκμ]ητος ἀνηνάμενος χθονὸς ἔργα	on earth
	[καὶ πιστοὺς ἐδίδα]ξας ἀπηνέα δαίμονα φεύγειν.	for a while, they have obtained immaculate glory
		in heaven.
		[You, too, in the same way], having suffered for a while,
		achieved immaculate glory.
		20 [In fact,] you are not dead, having been a faithful
		follower
		of the Holy Trinity who gives life. Such a tireless
		servant you proved to be, having rejected the works
		of the earth [of this
		world]
		and having taught the faithful to flee the cruel Devil.

line 1 φ[ιλ]: The letters IA are no longer visible.

line 4 ὁ[...]: After the omicron, a vertical shaft is visible; Keil tentatively suggests ὁ[γκον] (see also Empedokles, *De natura*, fr. 20.1, in *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. H. Diels and W. Kranz, 6th ed., vol. 1 [Berlin, 1951], 318).

line 5 Keil adds συναρωγόν at the end of the line.

line 8 ἀχεύ[ων]: ἀχεύ[ω] Keil.

line 11 γελῶντες: γελῶντος Keil, an important point for the meaning of the text.

line 12 [καὶ γοε]ρῶν Keil [ὁτρη]ρῶν Magnelli [Agosti, “Stile,” 243]

line 16 [θυμοῦ ἐξ] Keil

line 20 [οὐ μὴν γὰρ τ]έθνηκας Keil [οὐ γὰρ πω τ]έθνηκας Valerio (see also *Od.* 1.196 = 11.461) [Agosti, “Stile,” 243]

line 21 [τῆς Ἀγίας Τ]ριάδος Keil [ἀχράντου Τ]ριάδος *vel* [τῆς ἱερῆς Τ]ριάδος Agosti, “Stile” (see also *AnthGr* 8.82.2: [σεμνοτάτης Τ]ριάδος [Gregory of Nazianzus])

Column B

αχ -----
 ου -----
 παχ -----
 15 σπειρ -----
 νηπιο -----
 νηπι[ο -----]
 παιδν[ὸς? -----]
 εἰκο -----
 20 ἀβροσ -----
 παρθέν -----
 ψυχὴν -----
 ἡνεσ -----

line 18 παιδν: παιδι De Martino, but the nu is rather clear.

line 21 The last letter, nu, can be read with certainty.

After Keil's brief *editio princeps*, De Martino made a few improvements in Keil's transcription, based on photos. Ours is the first autopsy since Keil. The text makes it clear that the deceased, whose name was probably mentioned in the lost section of the inscription, was young and a devout Christian. The narrator's faith in Christian teachings, evidenced in line 9, and his belief that the virtuous life of the deceased ensures him equal status with the privileged position of Christian martyrs in heaven are the main consoling devices of the poem. Based only on what the text says, despite the extensive comparison of the deceased's lot with that of the martyrs, he could not have died a martyr.⁸ Indeed, there is ample parallel epigraphical material to show that imitating the lives of the martyrs and that of Christ was thought to be enough to lead to communion with Christ and the saints in heaven without the need for martyrdom. According to Christian teaching, martyrs, prophets, saints, and ascetics ascend to heaven and meet Christ there immediately after death.⁹ However, this belief in the martyr's direct access to heaven came to be extended to other believers who had led an exceptionally virtuous life. By preserving their celibacy, leading an ascetic life, or offering alms to the church, some laypeople too were often described in epitaphs as having received a martyr's crown as a reward and enjoying a privileged afterlife in the company of God.¹⁰ All other Christians had to await the Day of Judgment for that privilege.

8 See Keil, "Grabepigramm," 132.

9 This belief is based on Rev. 6.9–11 and 20.4, which is then elaborated on by Tertullian, *Ad martyras* 2.4; Cyprian, *Ep.* 31.3; and Dionysius of Alexandria, *HE* 6.42.5. See A. Stuiber, *Refrigerium interim: Die Vorstellung vom Zwischenzustand und die frühchristliche Grabeskunst*, Theophaneia 11 (Bonn, 1957), 74–81.

10 P. Gemeinhardt, "Eschatological Motifs and Patterns of Thought in Christian Hagiography," in *Eschatology in Antiquity: Forms and Functions*, ed. H. Marlow, K. Pollmann, and H. Van Noorden (Abingdon, 2021), 485–98, at 491–96; J. N. Bremmer, "Contextualizing Heaven in Third-Century North Africa," in *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions*, ed. R. S. Boustani and A. Y. Reed (Cambridge, 2004), 159–73, at 159, 165–66; and J. N. Bremmer, *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife: The 1995 Read-Tuckwell Lectures at the University of Bristol* (London, 2002), 58–59. See Jerome, *Ep.* 108.32 (for Paula): "Your mother has now after a long martyrdom won her crown. It is not only the shedding of blood that is accounted a confession: the spotless service of a devout mind is itself a daily martyrdom. Both alike are crowned; with roses and violets in the one case, with lilies in the other" (P. Schaff and H. Wace, eds., *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Second Series*, vol. 6, *The Principal Works of St. Jerome*, trans.

Keil notes that the few partially preserved initial words of the second column seem to suggest that either the epigram continued on the right side of the slab, or that there was another funerary epigram commemorating someone else who was also buried there. In the latter case, judging by the few fragmentary words beginning each of the last twelve lines (e.g., νηπιο, παρθέν, and παιδν), the poem may have referred to a girl.

De Martino comments on the epigram's allusions to certain biblical passages. As regards the use of the verb γελάω/γελώω, he notes its connection to the famous beatitudes in Luke's Gospel (6:21, 25) and reads it as a symbol for enjoying spiritual goods and being blessed. He identifies the phrases Θεοῦ Θεὸς υἱός (line 15) and ἡ Ἁγία Τριάς (line 21) as an orthodox, anti-"Arian" message; in this he is followed by Antonio Ferrua.¹¹ Keil, De Martino, and others accept that the voice of the epigram should be the father of the deceased.¹² However, apart from its strong consolatory tone and the young age of the departed, we cannot find any compelling evidence in the epigram itself for this view. The words συμφράδμων (adviser) in line 5 and perhaps [ἐταῖρον] (companion) in line 6 point to a bond of close companionship between two men, unless this is a father's attempt to accentuate his son's maturity and wisdom: He was young, he was his son, but at this early stage of his life, he was already his father's equal and right hand.¹³ It would rather seem from a number of phrases in the poem ("faithful follower of the Holy Trinity"; "having rejected the works of the earth [of this world]"; and, especially, the paradigmatic tone of the phrase "and having taught the faithful to flee the

cruel Devil") that the deceased was not merely a virtuous and celibate Christian, but possibly a member of the clergy.¹⁴ Virtues such as those recognized in the deceased are often found in episcopal epitaphs.¹⁵ And even though eternal life, community with God, and purity of mind and body are also attributed to laypeople on their tombstones, all three are found, for example, in the Latin epigram of Bishop Concordius of Arles (d. between 380–390).¹⁶ We therefore suggest that the relationship between the deceased and the narrator is that of two members of the local clergy rather than that of father and son. If this is the case, it indicates the strong feelings of companionship between members of the Christian community. The first section of the text, which is not very well-preserved, concludes with the "speaker's" statement that he finds it difficult to contain his emotions but that Christian teaching eases the pain of loss and death: The dead will follow the fate of the martyrs in securing a place in heaven. Christian teaching requires confidence in the face of death, leading to control over one's emotions.¹⁷

Yet the significance of this inscription lies mainly in the presence of the verbs γελάω/γελώω and μειδιάω/μειδίω, which occur no less than four times in the text (lines 8, 11, 15, and 16).¹⁸ This is the only example of an inscription that shows God, Christ, the martyrs, and, no

W. H. Fremantle [New York, 1893], 211). Epigraphy: J. Dresken-Weiland, "Tod und Jenseits in antiken christlichen Grabinschriften," in *Himmel, Paradies, Schalom: Tod und Jenseits in antiken christlichen und jüdischen Grabinschriften*, ed. J. Dresken-Weiland, A. Angerstorfer, and A. Merkt (Regensburg, 2012), 71–276, at 103–5, 150–53, 214–16; I. Kajanto, "The Hereafter in Ancient Christian Epigraphy and Poetry," *Arctos* 12 (1978): 27–53, at 31–32, 37, 48, 53; *AnthGr* 7.613, 673; and *SEG* 53.962 (Crete).

11 De Martino, "Dottrina," 420; and Ferrua, *Polemica*, 84.

12 Keil, "Grabepigramm," 131–32; De Martino, "Dottrina," 420; *SEG* 47.2148 ("probably erected by a father for his son, who possibly belonged to the Egyptian clergy"); and J. Dresken-Weiland, "Vorstellungen von Tod und Jenseits in den frühchristlichen Grabinschriften der Oikumene," *AntTard* 15 (2007): 285–302, at 297.

13 No such example is preserved, while ἐταῖρος is clearly differentiated from the parents elsewhere, e.g., R. Heberdey and A. Wilhelm, *Reisen in Kilikien*, DenkWien 44.6 (Vienna, 1896), 96.179 (Kelenderis).

14 Agosti, "Langues," 28, seems to agree on this point.

15 The motif of satisfying one's thirst in paradise, along with other motifs used here that pertain to the afterlife of the martyrs, goes back to Rev. 7:13–17. It is frequently encountered in Christian epigraphy with several examples from Egypt: W. Ameling, "Das Jenseits der Märtyrer," in *Topographie des Jenseits: Studien zur Geschichte des Todes in Kaiserzeit und Spätantike*, ed. W. Ameling, Altertumswissenschaftliches Kolloquium 21 (Stuttgart, 2011), 69–81, at 78; and Dresken-Weiland, "Tod," 218–22.

16 *ILCV* 1117; and Dresken-Weiland, "Vorstellungen," 290; cf. the tombstone of Diomedes below. See also Kajanto, "Hereafter," 46 ("Singularly many of them were Papal epitaphs . . ."); and C. Breytenbach and C. Zimmermann, *Early Christianity in Lycaonia and Adjacent Areas: From Paul to Amphilochius of Iconium*, Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 101 = Early Christianity in Asia Minor 2 (Leiden, 2018), 494 ("As a rule, Christian office holders are given the same attributes as other Christians in the epigrams, but frequently in the superlative and with clusters of attributes").

17 See 1 Thess. 4:13; M. Durst, "Nicht trauen wie die anderen, die keine Hoffnung haben (1 Thess. 4,13)" in *Volks glauben im antiken Christentum*, ed. H. Grieser and A. Merkt (Stuttgart 2009), 424–38.

18 The question of smiling and laughter is also a question of language. While there's a nuanced variety of words in Greek (esp. γελάω vs. μειδιάω), in Latin *subrideo* means "smiling," but often *rideo* is

less, the deceased laughing or smiling. Surprisingly, this element did not interest earlier scholars who studied the inscription as much as one might have expected. At the same time, this important text is completely absent from studies on laughter in this period and more generally.

The smile God bestows on the dead man in line 8 is associated with chastity. Physical and spiritual purity, which is often mentioned in epigrams in relation to bishops and clerics, is also found in similar texts written for the laity and is one of those virtues that can ensure the deceased a privileged afterlife, both in Christian and earlier pagan inscriptions—in the latter case predominantly those found on the graves of children or young people. The eulogy of the dead is then structured through a series of antitheses describing the state of the martyrs before and after death: Even in their distress, they laugh; though dead, they live on; though tortured, they wear victory wreaths.¹⁹ They mock their earthly sufferings and enjoy eternal glory in heaven. Their thirst is quenched in heaven once they see Christ smiling at them. God smiles again at the martyrs in line 15, while they laugh in line 11 and laugh at their earthly suffering in line 16. Let us now turn to the subject of laughter at the point of death and after death, earthly and heavenly, in other sources.

The Element of Laughter in a Funerary Context: Polytheistic and Christian

In its conceptions of the afterlife, the Greco-Roman world is characterized by pluralism. Having said that, the traditional understanding of the afterlife in Greek and Roman antiquity is that of a miserable existence in Hades, which is described as a dark abode, where laughter has no place. Hades himself is described as ἀμείδης (unsmiling) and δακρυχαρής (delighting in tears).²⁰

also used to imply that. See also M. Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (Berkeley, 2014), 70–74.

19 Christian martyrdom is often seen as an agon, with the martyrs as (godly) garlanded winners. Comparable vocabulary often occurs in inscriptions as well as martyr texts; see *Martyrium Pionii* 22.3; and R. Merkelbach, “Die ruhmvollen Blumenkohl-Ohren des Pionios von Smyrna,” *ZPapEpig* 76 (1989): 17–18, at 17. The Christian reference to God is clearly specified in *ICG* 372, lines 1–2: τὸν . . . οὐρανίου Γενέτου κύδιμον ἀθλοφόρον. See also *ICG* 539, 817, 2381, 4283 (regarding a female martyr); references are to *Inscriptiones Christianae Graecae*, <https://icg.uni-kiel.de/>.

20 E. Miranda, *Iscrizioni greche d'Italia: Napoli*, vol. 2 (Rome, 1995), 95, lines 2, 5; *IMylasa* 278*5, lines 9–10; and *IG* 12:6.2, 740, line 11 (Samos). See *AnthGr* 7:58–59, 439, on Pluto and Persephone

Less frequently, on tombstones, one encounters total denial of any form of existence after death, expressed in nihilistic, solemn, or even humorous ways.²¹

The other major belief about the afterlife among polytheists is that after death souls leave the body and, on account of their virtues, achievements, youth, or prior initiation into the mysteries, live an eternal blissful existence in variously described domains, among the gods, the blessed, the heroes, or other initiates (i.e., the Elysian Fields, the Isles of the Blessed, Mount Olympus, or among the stars). These VIP lounges are described as pleasant, but lack any clear reference to laughter, except, apparently, in the case of an elaborate epigram for a young boy from Smyrna (third century CE).²² This text says that on the recommendation of Hermes, this boy's soul was chosen to reside among the immortals on Mount Olympus. The gods considered the boy a friend and a companion at their heavenly feast. The boy offers wine to the gods, and they smile at him in return.²³

as the rulers of the “laughless” people. For more examples of this motif, including Christian ones, see S. Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (Cambridge, 2008), 370, n. 89. On ἀμείδης Hades(?) in a verse epitaph for a Christian, see R. Merkelbach and J. Stauber, *SGO* 3:72–73, 14/04/02; and *ICG* 149, lines 2–3 (ἀμίδέα δώματα Ἀδ[ο]υ). For more on the topic of unsmiling Hades and the only exception to that in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter 357–58, see S. Milanezi, “Le rire d'Hades,” *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* 21.2 (1995): 231–45.

21 A. Chaniotis, “Das Jenseits: Eine Gegenwelt?,” in *Gegenwelten zu den Kulturen der Griechenlands und Roms in der Antike*, ed. T. Hölscher (Munich, 2000), 159–81, at 159, n. 2, with rich bibliography. On humorous epitaphs, see A. Wypustek, “Laughing in the Face of Death: A Survey of Unconventional Hellenistic and Greek-Roman Funerary Verse-Inscriptions,” *Klio* 103.1 (2021): 160–87; and A. Helttula, “Epigraphical Laughter,” in *Laughter Down the Centuries*, vol. 2, ed. S. Jäkel and A. Timonen (Turku, 1995), 145–59.

22 Merkelbach and Stauber, *SGO* 1:547, 05/01/64, lines 9–16: Ἑρμείας λόγους· ὅς μ' οὐρανὸν ἤγαγε χειρῶν / αὐτίκα τειμήσας καὶ μοι κλέος ἐσθλὸν ἔδωκεν / οἰκεῖν ἐν μακάρεσσι κατ' οὐρανὸν ἀστερόεντα, / χρυσείοισι θρόνοισι παρήμενον ἐς φιλότιγα· καὶ με παρὰ τριπόδεσσι καὶ ἀμβροσίῃσι τραπέζαι[ς] / ἡδόμενον κατὰ δαῖτα θεοὶ φίλον εἰσορώσιν, / κρατὸς ἀπ' ἀθανάτοιο παρήϊσι μειδιώωντες / [νέκταρ ὅτ' ἐν] προχοαῖσιν ἐπισπένδω μακάρεσσι. See also A. Chaniotis, *Emotionen und Fiktionen: Gefühle in Politik, Gesellschaft und Religion der griechischen Antike* (Darmstadt, 2023), 146–47.

23 See how heaven is called “Olympus” in a Christian funeral poem: *CLE* 758. On the idea of a feast for the blessed with God in Christian paradise, see A. Merkt, “Das Schweigen und Sprechen der Gräber: Zur Aussagekraft frühchristlicher Epitaphie,” in Dresken-Weiland, Angerstorfer, and Merkt, *Himmel, Paradies, Schalom*, 13–70, at 47–49.

The picture of the young boy from Smyrna on Olympus is reminiscent of the story of the young Ganymede, who was abducted by Zeus to become the gods' favorite wine bearer; the comparison of the dead boy with Ganymede is known from several epitaphs.²⁴ This motif of the abductor god lives on even in a Christian funerary context, as, for example, in a Homerizing epigram from northern Lycaonia, where Christ assumes the role of Zeus by taking the young, unmarried, and prematurely deceased Diomedes to paradise, making him immortal and ageless.²⁵ This monument also serves as a good contrast to our inscription in the sense that it was clearly dedicated by a father to his young son, who is a devout Christian, whereas, as argued above, there is no indication of a father-son relationship in the inscription on the Rostock stone. As regards premortal, earthly laughter, in a significant number of funerary inscriptions there is a perception of death as the end of laughter and joy,²⁶ hence the frequent exhortations to the living to enjoy life while it lasts. On the tombstone of the agonothetes Capella in Prusias in Bithynia, we read the following: "Play and laugh as long as you live, for when you come here, there is nothing to see but night and silence. Here, there is no hum of the itinerant porter [or teacher], no one sees anyone here jumping about, and while Daphnus holds my body as an eternal abode, my good soul has entered the heavens."²⁷ The separation between the dead body and a surviving immaterial entity appears frequently in metrical inscriptions and continues—with the appropriate adaptations—in

Christian contexts.²⁸ The same applies to the concept of the soul's ascent after death to a blissful heavenly domain and the idea of death as sleep.

Other inscriptions praise the deceased because he enjoyed his life. For example, the tombstone of Menophilus, who died in Rome, tells us, "I was in mad joy all the time, I laughed, I amused myself, and I offered singing pleasures in my soul in every way, I grieved no one, I slandered no one, but a friend of the Muses, and of Bromius and the goddess of Paphos I was in my life, I came from Asia to the land of Italy and here I lie, though young, among the dead."²⁹ On two tombstones belonging to gladiators from Asia Minor, we read, "Rejoice and laugh, passerby, knowing that you, too, shall die."³⁰ This pattern is also often combined with parodies of notions about the afterlife that were obviously intended to make the reader laugh.³¹

The social and eschatological movement that was Christianity reduced the multiplicity of ideas about the afterlife associated with the pagan world, introducing others that were less diverse and contradictory and more rigorously dogmatic, moralistic, and soteriological.³² In both cases, the real challenge for the researcher is to discover what most people really believed about the afterlife in relation to what we often read on the subject in literary texts or tombstones addressing the members of their community, whether in a sophisticated fashion or in a brief and formulaic way.³³ The authoritative and paradigmatic force of the Scriptures as interpreted by the church fathers—i.e., the antigelastic attitude they claimed that Jesus took—cemented Christian attitudes toward laughter and the meaning of worldly life as a

24 Merkelbach and Stauber, *SGO* 2:190, 09/05/40, 3:206–7, 16/23/06, 207, 16/23/07, 370, 16/46/01. Cf. Hera's smile at her son Hephaestus who acts as the wine pourer at the gods' banquet in *Il.* 1.595–99.

25 MAMA 7:560; and Merkelbach and Stauber, *SGO* 3:61, 14/02/04 (= *ICG* 349), lines 6–11: ἀγνὸς ἀπιδόγαμος Χριστοῦ φίλος, ὃν θεὸς αὐτὸς ἤρπασε πρὶν κακίῃ κόσμου φρένας ἐξαπάτησε θήσιν ἀθάνατον καὶ ἀγήραον ἐν Παραδίσσῳ (pure, unmarried [inexperienced in matrimonial matters] friend of Christ, whom God himself snatched away before he deceived his mind in the wickedness of the world, took him, to put him, immortal and ageless, in paradise).

26 W. Ameling, "[φάγωμεν καὶ πῶμεν]: Griechische Parallelen zu zwei Stellen aus dem Neuen Testament," *ZPapEpig* 60 (1985): 35–43.

27 *I.Prusias (ad Hypium)* 72, lines 9–13; and Merkelbach and Stauber, *SGO* 2:231, 09/08/04 (third century CE): παῖζον καὶ γέλασον, ἐφ' ὅσον ζῆς, ὥδε γὰρ ἐλθὼν οὐδὲν ἔχεις καθιδεῖν ἢ νύκτα μακρὰν μετὰ σειγῆς· οὐ βαιούλου ψόφος ἐν<θ>, οὐ βαλλίζων τις ὁράται, ἀλλὰ νέκυν με Δαφνοῦς κατέχει εἰς αἰώνιον οἶκον, ἥ δ' ἀγαθὴ ψυχὴ εἰς οὐρανὸν αὐτὸν ἔδυνεν.

28 Merkt, "Schweigen," 47–49, 53–55; and Dresken-Weiland, "Tod," 102–5.

29 *IGUR* 3:1274: εὐφρανθεῖς συνεχῶς, γελάσας παῖξας· τε τρυφήσας, καὶ ψυχὴν ἱλαρώς· πᾶντων τέρψας ἐν αἰοδαῖς οὐδένα λυπήσας, οὐ λοῖδον ῥήματα πέμψας, ἀλλὰ φίλος Μουσῶν, Βρομίου Παφίης τε βιώσας ἐξ Ἀσίας ἐλθὼν Ἰταλῇ χθονὶ ἐνθάδε κείμεαι ἐν φθιμένους νέος ὢν· τοῦνομα Μηρόφιλος. For more examples, see Ameling, "Parallelen."

30 *TAM* 2.1:355, lines 18–22; and Merkelbach and Stauber, *SGO* 4:56, 17/10/05: παῖξε, γέλα, παροδείτα, βλέπων ὅτι καὶ σὲ θανεῖν δεῖ. See also *TAM* 4.1:109, line 7; and Merkelbach and Stauber, *SGO* 2:205, 09/06/05, with the earlier bibliography, as well as Merkelbach and Stauber, *SGO* 2:234, 09/08/07 (Prusias ad Hypium).

31 Wypustek, "Laughing."

32 Merkt, "Schweigen," 20–25.

33 Chaniotis, "Jenseits"; and I. Peres, *Griechische Grabinschriften und neutestamentliche Eschatologie*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 157 (Tübingen, 2003).

whole and, apparently, loomed large in the performative language of Christian funerary inscriptions.³⁴ Jesus said to his disciples (Luke 6:21, 25), “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh,” and “Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep,” referring to the Second Coming, when the faithful would face the Lord (Matthew 17:2; Revelations 22:4; 1 Corinthians 13:12). Addressing the Christian community of Corinth, Paul (1 Corinthians 15:29, 32) is also clear: “Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf? . . . What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’” For Basil, as for most church fathers, Jesus never laughed. Basil therefore notes, “Since our master condemns those who laugh in this life, it is patent that for the believer there is never a right time for laughter.”³⁵ John Chrysostom admonishes his congregation in similar words: “Yet hear how he [Paul, in Ephesians 5:3–5] dismisses all kinds of jesting. Now is a time of war and fighting, of watch and guard, of arming and arraying ourselves. The time of laughter can have no place here [οὐδένα τόπον ἐνταῦθα ὁ τοῦ γέλωτος ἂν ἔχοι καιρός]; for that is of the world. Hear what Christ says: ‘The world shall rejoice, but you shall be sorrowful’ [John 16:20]. Christ was crucified for your ills, and do you laugh? He was buffeted and endured such great sufferings because of your calamity and the tempest that had overtaken you; and you indulge yourself [τρυφᾷς]? And how

will you not then rather provoke Him?”³⁶ and “Let us mourn, my beloved, let us mourn now, so that we may really laugh, so that we may truly rejoice in the time of pure joy.”³⁷ On the other hand, Christian authors see the smile more positively.³⁸

As a result of the general disapprobation of laughter and of the pagan views of life after death by the early church, the notion of *carpe diem*, the theme of laughter, and a pessimistic view of the afterlife no longer had a place on Christian tombstones. The few exceptions should be considered idiosyncratic or irrelevant, e.g., the traditional exhortation of the talking stone to the passerby not to laugh at the grave’s dead occupant (παροδεῖτα μὴ γελάσης) survives only in an elaborate fifth-century(?) epigram in Homeric language from Boeotian Tanagra (Μὴ ποτε κερτομένων ἐπὶ φθιμένοισι γελάσσης).³⁹ Saint Gregory of Nazianzus would say of his dead mother “nor did a profane word ever pass your lips, nor did laughter ever sit, O God’s initiated, on your soft cheeks.”⁴⁰ Since a hedonistic approach to earthly life is generally condemned, eulogies of the happy life the deceased had lived are muted lest they make the deceased appear immoral and sinful in the eyes

34 On the general suspicion surrounding laughter in the development of early Christianity, see Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*, 471–519; N. Adkin, “The Fathers on Laughter,” *Orpheus* 6 (1985): 149–52; and T. Baconsky, *Le rire des Pères: Essai sur le rire dans la patristique grecque* (Paris, 1996). For Luke’s passage, see Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*, 475–76. See also A. K. Petrides, “Libanius *Declamatio* 27 (The Morose Man and His Son): Misanthropy and the Polemics of Laughter,” in “Τέρρα: Studies in Honor of Professor Menelaos Christopoulos,” ed. Athina Papachrysostomou et al., special issue, *Classics@25*, <https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HLNC.ESSAY:103900201>. On laughing in a monastic context, see B. Müller, *Der Weg des Weinen: Die Tradition des “Penthos” in den Apophthegmata Patrum*, *Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte* 77 (Göttingen, 2000), 126–29. For differing interpretations of Jesus’s attitude toward laughter, see M. Ebner, “Jesus – manchmal ein Schalk,” *Katechetische Blätter* 133 (2008): 242–47; P. Bloch, *Der fröhliche Jesus: Die Entdeckung seines Humors in den Evangelien* (Stuttgart, 1999); O. Betz, *Der Humor Jesu und die Fröhlichkeit der Christen* (Ulm, 1979); and A. Holl, *Der lachende Christus* (Vienna, 2005).

35 Basil, *Regulae fusius tractatae* 31 (PG 31:1104).

36 John Chrysostom, *In ep. Ephesus* 17 (PG 62:119).

37 John Chrysostom, *In ep. Hebr.* 15.4 (PG 63:123–24).

38 Basil, *Regulae fusius* 17 (PG 31:961–65, at 961B): Ἀχρὶ μὲν γὰρ μεδιάματος φαιδροῦ τὴν διάχυσιν τῆς ψυχῆς ὑποφαίνειν οὐκ ἀπρεπές, ὅσον δεῖξαι μόνον τὸ γεγραμμένον. Καρδίας εὐφραينوμένης, πρόσωπον θάλλει (For while it is not unfitting to express the overflow of the soul to the extent of a cheerful smile—if only as far as the Scripture shows: A glad heart makes a joyful face [Prov. 15:13]) (A. M. Silvas, *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great* [Oxford, 2005], 208). Cf. Ecclus. 21:20 (“A fool raises his voice in laughter, but a shrewd man will barely and quietly smile”); Clement, *Paedagogus* 2.5; and John Chrysostom, *In ep. Hebr.* 15.4 (PG 63:122). See C. Mazzucco, ed., *Riso e comicità nel cristianesimo antico: Atti del convegno di Torino, 14–16 febbraio 2005, e altri studi* (Alessandria, 2007); Adkin, “Fathers”; and Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*, 483–519. For the desert fathers’ attitude toward laughter, see Baconsky, *Rire*, 125–80.

39 As a stereotypical phrase, it occurs as early as the classical period and is included among the orders of the Seven Wise Men (ἐπὶ νεκρῷ μὴ γέλα): Stobaeus, *Anthologium* 3.1.173; R. Merkelbach and J. Stauber, *Jenseits des Euphrat* 12, 103B, line 134 (Bactria, Ai-Khanoum, third century BCE); *IG* 7:583, 12:7, 118–20, 131 (Arkesine, Amorgos); and *ICG* 4066 (Tanagra, fifth century; “Never mock contemptuously the deceased!”). Cf. the opposite exhortation on the tomb of a comic actor (*AnthGr* 7.414: Καὶ καπυρὸν γελάσας παραμειβεο [Laugh frankly as you pass by]); the death of a mime brings laughter to Hades (*AnthGr* 7.556).

40 *AnthGr* 8.25.

of the Christian community. In the very few cases in which references to the good life appear in epitaphs of first-generation Christians, they are tempered by soteriological expectations of salvation for the righteous.⁴¹ Similarly, the idea of death as the definitive end of existence ceases to find a place in funerary inscriptions, being contrary to the basic doctrines of the Christian faith.⁴² Moreover, mourning and pessimism about the afterlife are moderated thanks to eschatological hope.⁴³ Joy shifts from earth to heaven, from the ephemeral, embodied present to the incorporeal, eternal future.⁴⁴ That said, this attitude, especially outside of ecclesiastical circles, should not be seen as mirroring late antique society as a whole: Literary evidence and material culture bear witness to traditional attitudes vis-à-vis the hedonistic life and worldly delights that remained impervious to the new Christian moral standards.⁴⁵

41 Merkelbach and Stauber, *SGO* 3:176–78, 16/06/01 (Gaius of Eumeneia, third century). See also S. Mitchell, *The Christians of Phrygia from Rome to the Turkish Conquest* (Leiden, 2023), 132–33, 157–76; and Merkelbach and Stauber, *SGO* 3:172, 16/04/04 (Menodorus of Apameia, third century). For the concept of *tryphe* (delight) in the epigraphic evidence, see *SEG* 61:1636, and above, n. 29. For how often, in Christian epitaphs from Egypt, the phrase ἐν παραδείσῳ τῆς τρυφῆς (the garden of delight; see Gen. 3:23) as the destination of the dead is repeated, see *SEG* 8:798, 43:1175.

42 Nevertheless, see the nihilistic formulas “How far? So far” and “This is life” in a few early Christian epitaphs: D. Feissel, “Notes d’épigraphie chrétienne (X),” *BCH* 119 (1995): 375–89, at 386–89; and L. Di Segni, “A Greek Inscription from the French Hospital Compound Yafa (Jaffa),” *Atiqot* 100 (2020): 221–24, at 223. See also B. D. Ehrman, *Heaven and Hell: A History of the Afterlife* (New York, 2020).

43 See J. Quasten, *Musik und Gesang in den Kulturen der heidnischen Antike und christlichen Frühzeit*, 2nd ed., *Liturgiegeschichtliche Quellen und Forschungen* 25 (Münster, 1973), 218–31, with examples of Christian leaders trying to combat pagan mourning rites. In their place, singing hymns and psalms became the behavior expected of the faithful.

44 Regarding the promise of laughter in the afterlife, see W. Thiede, *Das verheissene Lachen: Humor in theologischer Perspektive* (Göttingen, 1986).

45 See funerary epigrams of the sixth-century so-called Circle of Agathias: *AnthGr* 7.602 (Agathias), 603 (Julian, prefect of Egypt), 7.602 (Agathias), 10.87 (Palladas). Note the epigram of a funerary panel painting or a portrait showing a smiling figure: *AnthGr* 7.579 (Leontius Scholasticus): Πέτρου ὁρᾷς ῥητῆρος αἰ γελώσαν ὀπωπὴν (You see [here] the ever-smiling face of Peter). On ideas and imagery of traditional domestic luxury, see H. Maguire, “The Good Life,” in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, P. Brown, and O. Grabar (Cambridge, MA, 1999), 238–57. John Chrysostom’s need to repeatedly caution his audiences

As regards the corpus of Christian funerary epigraphy, however, belief in a blissful afterlife in communion with God and/or the saints as the reward for an exemplary life, or simply as something to hope for, becomes the most common feature.⁴⁶ But, even though paradise is portrayed as a realm of idyllic and lasting bliss in communion with a loving god and his elect, no specific references to heavenly laughter are found on tombstones and scarcely ever in Christian literature in general—hence, the peculiarity of the inscription under examination here.

The Smiling Martyrs

In the Rostock inscription, the deceased is clearly identified with the Christian martyrs, who laugh at their extreme suffering. These laughing martyrs echo numerous accounts in martyrs’ (and apostles’) *acta* and *passiones* in which, unlike Jesus, the martyr smiles in joy before death or during torture as they feel close to the end of their earthly torments, from which they feel detached,⁴⁷ and anticipate their imminent admission into the company of God and those who live with him in paradise. In contrast to the prescribed antigelastic conduct of the worldly and ascetic-minded Christian, the martyr’s smile serves as an ideal of prodigious Christian faith and is filled with strong eschatological symbolism. We cite below a few examples of such texts.⁴⁸

In the *Acts of the Apostle Andrew* (late second century), we are told that Andrew was smiling (μειδιών) while hanging on a cross. One of the bystanders asks him, “Why do you smile [Τί μειδιᾷς], Andrew, servant of God? Should your laughter [ὁ γέλως σου] not make us mourn and weep because we are being deprived of you?” Andrew answers, “Shall I not laugh [Οὐ μὴ

against laughter and other worldly pleasures might also suggest that those admonitions fell largely flat; see Petrides, “Libanius.”

46 Merkt, “Schweigen,” 50; and Dresken-Weiland, “Vorstellungen,” 289, 294, 297. See also *AnthGr* 7.613; and Bremmer, *Rise*, 58–59.

47 For that matter, see L. S. Cobb, *Divine Deliverance: Pain and Painlessness in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (Oakland, CA, 2017).

48 The sources are abundant: In the hagiographical writings available in the TLG, there are nearly five hundred instances of μειδιάω or derivatives thereof. On the smile of the martyr in martyrologies in general, see P. Lanfranchi, “The Smile of the Martyr,” in *Humour in the Beginning: Religion, Humour and Laughter in Formative Stages of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism*, ed. R. Dijkstra and P. van der Velde, *Topics in Humor Research* 10 (Amsterdam, 2022), 81–92.

γελάσω] . . . , my child?” Andrew then gives a speech explaining his laughter, addressing the whole crowd: “What benefit is there for you who gain for yourselves external goods but do not gain your very selves? . . . Flee from everything merely temporal. Even now speed away with me. . . . I am leaving to prepare routes there for those who align themselves with me and are equipped with a pure faith and with love for him.”⁴⁹

In the *Martyrdom of Carpus, Papylus, and Agathonice* (late second/early third century), we read that, while Carpus is being nailed down to be burned in the amphitheater of Pergamum, he appears to be smiling (*προσεμειδιάσεν*). The bystanders are amazed and ask him, “What are you laughing at [Τί ἐστιν ὅτι ἐγέλασας]:” And Carpus says to them: “I saw the glory of the Lord and I was happy. Besides I am now rid of you and have no share in your sins.” The image of the burning Carpus later prompts Agathonice, who is in the crowd, to throw off her clothes and jump on the pyre full of joy (*ἀγαλλιωμένη*).⁵⁰

In the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* (third/fourth century), we read: “The day of their victory dawned, and they marched from the prison to the amphitheatre, joyously [*hilaris*], as if going to heaven, their faces radiant [*vultu decori*]; and if by chance they trembled, it was from joy and not from fear.”⁵¹ “The joy of martyrdom, their hope in the promises, their love for Christ, and the Spirit of the Father” (ἡ χαρὰ τῆς μαρτυρίας καὶ ἡ ἐλπίς τῶν ἐπηγγελμένων καὶ ἡ πρὸς τὸν Χριστὸν ἀγάπη) comforted the martyrs of Lyons (late second century) and made them advance toward death “joyously, with majesty and great beauty mingled on their countenances” (ἱλαροὶ προήεσαν, δόξης καὶ χάριτος πολλῆς ταῖς ὄψεσιν αὐτῶν συγκεκραμένης), as if taking

part in a wedding feast, leaving behind only “joy, peace, harmony, and love” to their loved ones.⁵²

This theme could be extended to dialogues with an opponent, basically illustrating who has the last laugh. The *Martyrdom of Pionius and His Companions* (late third century) is a case in point. The apologia of Pionius and his companions takes place before the assembled crowd in the Roman forum of Smyrna on the day of the Jewish Passover. At the exhortation of the priest of the imperial cult to renounce his faith, Pionius begins his apologia, the text tells us, with a joyful face (*φαιδρῶ τῷ προσώπῳ*). And, after a while, he says, “I understand that you laughed [*ἐπιγελῶντες*] and rejoiced [*ἐπιχαίροντες*] at those who deserted [their faith], and considered as a joke [*παίγνιον*] the error of those who voluntarily offered sacrifice. Men of Greece, it behoved you to listen to your teacher Homer, who counsels that it is not a holy thing to gloat over those who are to die [*ἐπὶ τοῖς ἀποθνήσκουσι καυχᾶσθαι*].”⁵³ Further on, when Polemon the imperial priest asks Pionius to sacrifice, Pionius says, “Would that I were able to persuade you to become Christians.” The others around Polemon burst into loud laughter (*μέγα ἀναγέλασαντες*) and say, “You have not such power that we should be burnt alive [*ζῶντες καῶμεν*].” “It is far worse,” Pionius answers them, “to burn after death [*ἀποθανόντας καυθῆναι*].” The Christian Sabina, who is also present, smiles (*μειδιώσης*) at Pionius’s words, and the priest and his people ask her, “You laugh?,” to which she says, “If God so wills, . . . I do. You see, we are Christians. Those who believe in Christ will laugh unhesitatingly in everlasting joy [*Γελάς; ἡ δὲ εἶπεν· Ἐὰν ὁ θεὸς θέλῃ, ναί· χριστιανοὶ γὰρ ἐσμεν· ὅσοι γὰρ εἰς Χριστὸν πιστεύουσιν ἀδιστακτως γελάσουσιν ἐν χαρᾷ αἰδίῳ*],” echoing Christ’s words in Luke.⁵⁴

It is noteworthy that the martyr’s smile gradually became a topos, as later versions of such texts added the smile, where older versions did not attest it. This can be shown in various texts, for example, in the *Vita of Abercius*

49 *Acta Andreae* 55–58 (Corpus christianorum, Series apocryphorum, 6:519.6–7, 523.1–2, 525.21–22, 527.3–4); translation from D. R. MacDonald, *The Acts of Andrew and the Acts of Andrew and Matthias in the City of the Cannibals* [Atlanta, 1990], 417–23).

50 *Martyrium Carpi, Papyli et Agathonicae* 38–39, 44 (translation from H. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* [Oxford, 1972], 26, lines 20–23, 28, line 6). In the Latin version, it is Pamphilus rather than Carpus: *Martyrium Carpi, Papyli et Agathonicae* 4.3 (Musurillo, *Acts*, 32, lines 19–21).

51 *Passio Perpetuae* 18.1 (translation from T. J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* [New York, 2012], 133). In the Greek translation, it is ἱλαροὶ καὶ φαιδρῶι τῷ προσώπῳ (Heffernan, *Passion*, 453, line 4).

52 *Martyrium Lugdunensis* 1.34–35, 2.7; and H. R. Seeliger and W. Wischmeyer, eds., *Martyrerliteratur: Herausgegeben, übersetzt, kommentiert und eingeleitet* (Berlin, 2015), 62, lines 14–18; 76, line 11 (translation from Musurillo, *Acts*, 73, 85).

53 *Martyrium Pionii* 4.1–8; and Seeliger and Wischmeyer, *Martyrerliteratur*, 139, lines 6–24 (translation from Musurillo, *Acts*, 139).

54 *Martyrium Pionii* 7.3–5; and Seeliger and Wischmeyer, *Martyrerliteratur*, 144, line 26–146, line 4 (translation from Musurillo, *Acts*, 145–47).

(third/fourth century?),⁵⁵ the *Passio of Conon* (probably the one from Iconium, fourth/fifth century?),⁵⁶ and the *Acts of Thecla* (late second century).⁵⁷

Being sardonic or joking was also part of the martyr's performative repertoire, if this served catechetical purposes. The martyr Charitine of Corycus (fourth century?), after being drowned in the sea with a stone tied to her neck, comes back to the governor, deriding him (καταγελῶσα αὐτόν) with the words, "Where are the tools of torture you prepared?"⁵⁸ In the final hour of their martyrdom when their flesh was being burned on a pyre, a smiling Saint Laurence in Rome and three martyrs in Phrygia—Macedonius, Theodulus, and Tatianus—gave more or less the same answer to their torturer: "You have roasted one part; turn over the other and eat," and "If you wish to taste broiled meat, Amachius, turn us on the other side also, lest we should appear but half cooked to your taste."⁵⁹

55 The bishop Abercius smiles (μειδιάσας) at the governor when he is threatened: *Vita Abercii* 37 (Teubner 28, lines 20–21; 29, line 4). This chapter is thought to have been added later. As Abercius's textual tradition is not very clear, the reverse is also possible; some assume that the longer version of this text is the older version: Seeliger and Wischmeyer, *Märtyrerliteratur*, 409.

56 While the early versions of Conon's passions do not attest him smiling (P. Pilhofer, ed., *Das Martyrium des Konon von Bidana in Isaurien: Einleitung, Text und Übersetzung*, TU 188 [Berlin, 2020]), a later version does. When Conon is thrown into a hot cauldron, he laughs about this torture (καταγελῶν τῆς κολάσεως): "Are you playing, governor, aren't you in a hurry?" Smiling (μειδιάσας), he adds, "You crazy fool, I deceived your fire and was I going to be afraid of your smoke?" (F. Halkin, "Vie de S. Conon d'Isaurie," *AB* 103 [1985]: 5–34, at 7). Regarding the identification of this Conon with the one from Iconium, see Pilhofer, *Konon*, 79–80.

57 Thecla does not smile in the two trials described in her second-century acts, but she does so in the late antique version: When she is ordered to climb onto the burning pyre, she does so with a steadfast, joyful, and tranquil gaze (ὁρθῶ δὲ καὶ φαιδρῶ καὶ ἀκλινεῖ τῷ βλέμματι). When Christ—in the shape of Paul—appears to her in a vision, she smiles (ὑπομειδιάσαι), strengthened, and says to herself: "Behold, Paul is looking after me and watching me, that I do not apostatize from the beautiful and blessed creed, weakening and abating and flinching from the fire." See *Vita et Miracula Theclae* 1.12 (G. Dagron, *Vie et miracles de sainte Thècle: Texte grec, traduction et commentaire*, SubsHag 62 [Brussels, 1978], 218, lines 37–38, 42).

58 *Martyrium Charitinae* 4.1 (H. Delehaye, "Les actes inédits de sainte Charitine martyre à Corycos en Cilicie," *AB* 72 [1954]: 5–14, at 12).

59 Ambrose, *De officiis* 1.41.207; and Prudent., *Perist.* 11.401–8. For more elaborate dialogue between Decius and Laurence, see *Passio Polochronii* 27–28: Laurence answers "smiling and was consoled" (H. R. Seeliger and W. Wischmeyer, eds., *Legendae martyrum*

We therefore conclude that the martyrs' laughter, as well as the series of antitheses in the Rostock text regarding the martyrs' posthumous lot, goes back to numerous martyrological accounts. These texts were pivotal in forming Christian identity, notions of the ideal behavior of community members, perceptions of the afterlife, and Christian art. In these texts and our inscription, the martyr's smile in the face of death or during torture expresses joy, as they know they are approaching the end of their earthly toil and because they are certain that they will soon meet their Lord in paradise.⁶⁰ It also denotes moral superiority over, and defiance of, their torturers and the passions of the body. The use of the verb ἐπεγγελάω (laugh at, exalt over) in line 16 of the Rostock text precisely manifests the martyrs' superiority over the travails of carnal existence.⁶¹

Jesus's Smile

In the Rostock inscription, Jesus is presented as smiling upon seeing the martyrs in line 15. The aversion to laughter among Christian authorities was primarily founded on the observation that Jesus never appeared laughing or smiling in the Gospels, nor in his beatitude in Luke's version, as mentioned above. While the Gospels deal with Jesus's life on earth, the smile associated with him here surely occurs in heaven. However, even though this appears to be entirely consistent with the eternal rejoicing enjoyed in paradise, this motif is

urbis Romae: Lateinisch-deutsch / Märtyrerlegenden der Stadt Rom, Fontes Christiani 96 [Freiburg, 2022], 326, lines 13–16: *ridens confortabatur*); he speaks his final words (quoted above) "with a calm face" (*vultu placido*: Seeliger and Wischmeyer, *Legendae*, 329, lines 8–11; translation from M. Lapidge, *The Roman Martyrs: Introduction, Translations, and Commentary* [Oxford, 2018], 342). In the same text (§5), some martyrs-to-be are "beaten with lead-weighted whips." In this way "they were comforted all the more, and they shouted out with happy faces" (*vultu alacri*: Seeliger and Wischmeyer, *Legendae*, 294, lines 3–4; translation from Lapidge, *Roman Martyrs*, 328); see also Socrates, *HE* 3.15.6. On martyrs' jokes, see Lanfranchi, "Smile"; and E. Giannarelli, "Humour in Monastic and Hagiographic Literature: The Ways Christians Laughed," *StP* 39 (2006): 361–65.

60 Ameling, "Jenseits," 74; and G. W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge, 1995), 59–60. On saints dying with a smile on their lips, see M. Hinterberger, "Messages of the Soul: Tears, Smiles, Laughter and Emotions Expressed by Them in Byzantine Literature," in *Greek Laughter and Tears: Antiquity and After*, ed. M. Alexiou and D. Cairns (Edinburgh, 2017), 125–45, at 143–44.

61 The verb ἐπεγγελάω does not seem to appear in late antique hagiography, at least not applied to the martyrs (TLG).

uncommon in Christian texts. That being said, a smiling Jesus does appear in a few apocryphal apostolic romances and apocalypses. It is thus worth examining these occurrences in Christian literature in which Jesus, God, saints, or angels appear to laugh or smile.

Jesus appears to laugh in a group of fourth-century apocryphal texts, mainly from Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, which are described as Gnostic, Docetic, or Sethian.⁶² Jesus laughs ironically at his disciples, who do not understand the true meaning of his teaching: In the *Apocalypse of Peter* (late second/early third century), Peter recounts an apocalyptic vision in which, while the docetic Christ is arrested and crucified, the true Savior, “glad and laughing,” watches the crucifixion scene from above and reveals himself to him.⁶³ The *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* (late second/early third century) presents a variation on the same episode: Simon of Cyrene takes the place of Jesus on the cross; here again Jesus, sitting in heaven and watching the scene, laughs haughtily at the ignorance of his disciples.⁶⁴ In another example, the Greek version of the second-century apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (second century), the child Jesus laughs at the despair he causes his teacher and at the idea of his being taught.⁶⁵ In these texts, Jesus’s laughter is derisive and echoes the way laughter often functions in the Old Testament, where

the god Yahweh is also described as laughing.⁶⁶ There are a few further examples in Coptic apocryphal texts too.⁶⁷ Setting aside these cases where Jesus laughs in derision or happiness, what appears to be more relevant to his smile in our example is a series of apocryphal accounts of Christ’s epiphanies to his apostles.

In the *Acts of Peter* (third/fourth century), Jesus, clad in a radiant vestment, appears to Peter in a dream in Rome smiling (*subridetem*) and gives him some advice.⁶⁸ In a version of the *Acts of Paul* (second century), a young boy (who is to be identified with Jesus) appears to Paul in prison at Ephesus and, smiling (μειδειάσαντος), loosens Paul’s bonds. After that, “Paul jumped for joy as if in paradise.”⁶⁹

One of John’s sermons to the brethren in the apocryphal *Acts of John* (late second/early third century) is relevant to our subject here: “Let him [Jesus] rejoice along with us, because we behave well; let him be glad because we live in purity. Let him be refreshed because

62 On the laughter motif in these texts, see I. S. Gilhus, “Derisive Laughter and Religious Identity in Ancient Christianity,” in Dijkstra and van der Velde, *Humour in the Beginning*, 33–46; and G. G. Stroumsa, “Christ’s Laughter: Docetic Origins Reconsidered,” in *The Crucible of Religion in Late Antiquity: Selected Essays* (Tübingen, 2021), 91–108. Beside the texts discussed below, see also *Evangelium veritatis*, Nag Hammadi Codices 1.3, 31.1–9; and *Epistula Petri*, Nag Hammadi Codices 8.2, 139.20.

63 *Apocalypsis Petri*, Nag Hammadi Codices 7.3, 81.11, 17, 82.6, 83.1–4. Cf. *Apocalypsis Iohannis*, Nag Hammadi Codices 2.13.19, 22.11, 26.25.

64 *Great Seth*, Nag Hammadi Codices 7.2, 55.30–56.19. See also Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.2.4.4; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 2.4.3 (as the Gnostic Basilides’ doctrine); and R. Kasser, M. Meyer, and G. Wurst, eds., *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington, DC, 2006), 21, 24, 31, 42.

65 *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 5 (J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* [Oxford, 1993], 77–78, 81). For the Syriac version, see T. Burke, “The Infant Gospel of Thomas (Syriac),” in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, vol. 1, ed. T. Burke and B. Landau (Grand Rapids, MI, 2016), 52–68, at 63, 65. In the Revelation of the Magi (in Syriac), the luminous child Jesus laughs and speaks to Mary and Joseph about his great mysteries (B. Landau, “The Revelation of the Magi,” in Burke and Landau, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:19–38, at 36).

66 On laughing in the Old Testament, see D. Lys, “Quand Dieu rit,” *Études théologiques et religieuses* 79.2 (2004): 201–26; and Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*, 479, 517, n. 110. The hermeneutical prefiguration of Christ in Isaac’s Akedah (whose name means “may [God] laugh”) offers Clement of Alexandria (*Paedagogus* 1.5.21.3–23.2) the opportunity to interpret laughter as a sign of salvation and Christ’s victory over death. On Clement’s stance on laughing, see N. Graham, “Opponent or Advocate? Exploring Clement of Alexandria’s Attitude(s) Towards Laughter,” in Dijkstra and van der Velde, *Humour in the Beginning*, 47–62. Stroumsa, “Laughter,” sees here a possible interpretation of Christ’s laughter in Docetic theology.

67 In Coptic, the verbs *ⲥⲱⲃⲉ* and *ⲁⲛⲣ*, as well as the phrase *ⲛⲉⲧⲣⲱⲩ ⲛⲥⲱⲃⲉ*, are used. All three are ambiguous and can be translated as laughing or smiling; e.g., in the book of Bartholomew, Jesus laughs at (personified) Death after resurrection (Burke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:101); in the formerly so-called Gospel of the Savior (Berlin-Strasbourg Apocryphon), Jesus seeing the cross laughs as part of a dance with his disciples (A. Suci, *The Berlin-Strasbourg Apocryphon: A Coptic Apostolic Memoir*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 370 [Tübingen, 2017], 154B, lines 6–9; translation on 175). In the Investiture of Abbaton, the Angel of Death, Jesus laughs at the apostles’ ignorance about the fate of souls in the Last Judgment (A. Suci and I. Saweros, “The Investiture of Abbaton, the Angel of Death,” in Burke and Landau, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:526–54, at 542).

68 *Acta Petri* 16 (M. Döhler, ed., *Acta Petri: Text, Übersetzung und Kommentar zu den Actus Vercellenses*, TU 171 [Berlin, 2018], 92, lines 415–16).

69 C. Schmidt, ed., *Acta Pauli: Nach dem Papyrus der Hamburger Staats- und Universitäts-Bibliothek*, Veröffentlichungen aus der Hamburger Staats- und Universitäts-Bibliothek, Neue Folge 2 (Glückstadt, 1936), 32, lines 17–18: ἀγαλλιώμενος ἐσκήρτησεν ὡς ἐν παραδίῳ.

our behavior is sober. Let him be unconcerned because we are temperate, let him be pleased because we live in fellowship, let him laugh because we show self-control, and let him be delighted because we love him!”⁷⁰ The juxtaposition here of chastity with Jesus’s smile is striking, as it could be seen roughly to correspond to the first lines of the Rostock inscription. In the same text, a beautiful celestial youth appearing in a vision, and identified with Christ, greets John with a smile (εἰδὼν τινα εὐμορφὸν νεανίσκον μειδιῶντα) and commands him to resurrector the Christian Drusiana.⁷¹

In the context of the imminent death of one of his servants, a vision of a smiling Christ proclaiming a blessed afterlife can be found in the *Vita of Saint Ambrose of Milan* by Paulinus of Milan. There we read that “in the same place in which he [Ambrose] was lying, as we have learned from a report of St. Bassianus, bishop of the church at Lodi, for he himself had heard it from St. Ambrose, when he was praying with this St. Bassianus, he observed that the Lord Jesus had approached him and was smiling upon him. And not many days later he was taken away from us.”⁷²

Though not a standard feature of his epiphanies, in the above examples Jesus’s smile is revealed as a friendly, encouraging, and reassuring gesture. Similarly, in pagan epic poetry a smile often expresses affable kindness, which, whenever gods meet mortals, is combined with a sense of superiority.⁷³ Jan Bremmer and others suggest that the smiling heavenly figures in dreams and visions in early Christian apocryphal texts, passions, and miracle stories are derived from pagan epiphanies, “where the appearing deity traditionally smiles to

reassure anxious mortals.”⁷⁴ Reflecting perhaps Christ’s epiphanies, saints, martyrs, and angels are also sometimes described as smiling, luminous figures in dreamed visions. In collections of healing miracles, for example, the duos of Saints Cosmas and Damian and Cyrus and John are shown smiling at sleeping patients before speaking to them, strongly recalling similar accounts of the appearances of the god Asclepius.⁷⁵

In the heavenly realm, as seems to be the case in our inscription, Jesus appears smiling in a poem in Homeric dactylic hexameter, preserved in fragments and probably written in Egypt in the second half of the fourth century, known as the *Vision of Dorotheus* (*Ὁρασις Δωροθέου*). It presents heavenly figures in an encounter with a mortal in paradise where they smile at him no less than four times. The vision is set in God’s palace in heaven, which is modeled on an imperial court.⁷⁶ Jesus’s smile at Dorotheus precedes an accusation and later an order for him to be punished; thus this smile seems not to be the genial kind (lines 111, 126). On the other hand, the archangel Gabriel’s smile introduces his call to Dorotheus to repent and follow him (and God: line 218). God’s smile near the end, while not apparently ominous, accompanies his rejection of a bold new request from Dorotheus (line 315). Undoubtedly, the smile in this text marks key moments in the contact between heavenly figures and a mortal. It is an aspect of oral conduct and may imply superiority or derision, but it seems far from being always amicable or approbatory of that mortal.⁷⁷ Finally, Romanus Melodus (sixth century) has Jesus smile in derision in an eschatological context. In *kontakion* forty-two, Hades laments for several stanzas the defeat he suffered by Christ’s triumphal Resurrection. Jesus then emerges from the tomb: “But He, smiling [*μειδιάσας*] at

70 *Acta Iohannis* 107.9 (Corpus christianorum, Series apocryphorum, 1:297.9) has the main phrase as γελᾶτω [μειδιάτω] σωφρονούντων ὑμῶν (translation based on Elliot, *Testament*, 107, 335). Eric Junod and Jean-Daniel Kaestli (on pages 50–51) argue for deleting μειδιάτω here as a *lectio difficilior*.

71 *Acta Iohannis* 73.3 (Corpus christianorum, Series apocryphorum, 1:267.3).

72 Translation from J. A. Lacy, trans., “Life of St. Ambrose by Paulinus,” in *Early Christian Biographies*, ed. R. J. Deferrari, Fathers of the Church 15 (Washington, DC, 2001), 25–66, at 61.

73 *Il.* 1.595–96 (Hera), 6.404 (Hector), 8.38 (Zeus); and *Od.* 4.609 (Menelaus), 5.180 (Calypso), 13.287 (Athena). For more examples and discussion, see Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*, 53, 55; and M. Puelma, “Die Dichterbegegnung in Theokrits ‘Thalysien,’” *Museum helveticum* 17 (1960): 144–64, at 149, n. 17.

74 Bremmer, “Heaven,” 163–64; Ameling, “Jenseits,” 79; and R. L. Fox, *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World from the Second Century AD to the Conversion of Constantine* (London, 1986), 362. See also *AnthGr* 9.441.5, where Palladas sees a smiling Heracles speaking to him in a dream.

75 O. Weinreich, *Antike Heilungswunder: Untersuchungen zum Wunderglauben der Griechen und Römer* (Giessen, 1909), 3, n. 2.

76 See Merkt, “Schweigen,” 49–50, on paradise as a heavenly palace and city.

77 See A. H. M. Kessels and P. W. van der Horst, “The Vision of Dorotheus (Pap. Bodmer 29): Edited with Introduction, Translation and Notes,” *VChr* 41 (1987): 313–59.

these words, said to those behind Him, 'Follow me.'⁷⁸ Jesus's smile here appears to be one of righteous derision toward his archenemy.⁷⁹

It is widely believed that after their martyrdom Christian martyrs ascend straight to heaven, where they are often met by Jesus, who makes them assessors at his heavenly court.⁸⁰ Paradise is also generally portrayed as a place of eternal joy, affluence, and peace.⁸¹ Yet these standard topoi are not marked by laughing or smiling faces in our sources. A few descriptions of the martyrs arriving in paradise and their first contact with God suggest that the kind of smiling attested here should be understood in the framework of Christ welcoming newcomers to paradise. A vision from the *passio* of the martyrs Marian and James suffices: The future martyr Marian, after being tortured, experiences a vision that brings him to a tribunal in the heavenly court, where the martyr Cyprian welcomes him with a smile (*arrisit*) and asks him to sit with him.⁸² The cordial welcome to heaven and meeting with God he experiences is described in a vision attributed to Perpetua in her third-century *passio*: "And I saw an enormous garden and a white-haired man sitting in the middle of it dressed in shepherd's clothes, a big man, milking sheep. And standing around were many thousands dressed in white. And he raised his head, looked at me, and said: 'You are welcome here, child.' And he called me, and from the cheese that he had milked he gave me as it were a mouthful."⁸³ In another vision from the same

text, Saturus and Perpetua give God the kiss of peace, and he strokes their faces with his hand as if welcoming them.⁸⁴ The *Vita of Saint Melania the Younger* by Gerontius (ca. 452) offers yet another characteristic representation of paradise and the joy that accompanies the admission of newcomers there:

The blessed one enjoyed the fruit of her prayer and joyfully [μετ' εὐφροσύνης] she ascended to heaven, having put on her virtues as a garment. . . . And the holy angels received her with joy [χαίροντες], for in her corruptible body, she had imitated their lack of passion. . . . In the same manner, the holy prophets and the apostles, whose lives and teachings she had fulfilled in deeds, received her in their choir with great joy [μετὰ πολλῆς εὐφροσύνης]. And the holy martyrs, whose memories she had glorified and whose struggles she had voluntarily endured, proceeded with joy [ἀγαλλιώμενοι] to meet her. Thus, she is enjoying in heaven what "the eye has not seen and the ear has not heard, nor has entered into the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9; Isa. 64:4).⁸⁵

When Christ smiles at the dead and the martyrs in the Rostock text, this should take place in heaven and probably at the very first moment of his friendly encounter with the newly admitted believers and as a consequence of it. The importance given to the moment that pious Christians are received in heaven, and especially when they meet with Jesus and/or those who are already there, supports this view. Based on the comparative data discussed above, Jesus's smile should be interpreted as affectionate and reassuring, as sometimes reported of the smiles of the pagan gods. But it may also underline God's major quality as a loving father: "Welcome, my child," Perpetua hears God telling her. The martyrs are depicted here crowned, satisfying their thirst, and meeting their Lord in an atmosphere of rejoicing. New arrivals are described as joyful events that include welcoming salutes, embraces, kisses, and repeated praises to God. This cordiality seems to reproduce the atmosphere of the gatherings of Christian communities on

78 Romanus Melodus, *Cantica* 42.9 (Romanus Melodus, *Cantica* 25 θ', line 1 [P. Maas and C. A. Trypanis, *Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica: Cantica Genuina* (Oxford, 1963), 191]); translation from M. Carpenter, *Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine Melodist*, vol. 1, *On the Person of Christ* (Columbia, MO, 1970), 266.

79 In his hymns, Romanus emphasizes the aspect of joy that Christ personifies for Christians several times, using the words χαρά, ἡλαρότης, and φαιδρότης. He also attributes joy to him well beyond that attested in the canonical texts. Here, though, he adds for the first time the physical aspect of smiling: A. M. Taragna, "Il sorriso di Gesù: Una nota sui contaci di Romano il Melodo," in Mazzucco, *Riso*, 779–91. See Hinterberger, "Messages," 139–40, on contempt displayed through laughter as a virtuous attitude in Byzantine texts.

80 Bremmer, "Heaven," 161–67, on paradise as a heavenly tribunal; and Ameling, "Jenseits," 71.

81 Merkt, "Schweigen," 27–63; Bremmer, *Rise*, 56–70; and Bremmer, "Heaven."

82 Musurillo, *Acts*, 203, line 6.

83 *Passio Perpetuae* 4.9 (Heffernan, *Passion*, 107, lines 10–12; translation on 127).

84 *Passio Perpetuae* 12.5 (Heffernan, *Passion*, 115, lines 3–5).

85 E. A. Clark, *Melania the Younger: From Rome to Jerusalem* (New York, 2021), 238–39.

earth.⁸⁶ Jesus's and God's smiles in the Rostock text therefore are a rare visual and communicative reflection of paradise's eternal joy and of the spiritual joy that he himself personifies and offers to his believers.

Conclusion

The Rostock epigram is important in several respects. While it displays many eschatological ideas that can be found in other related texts (e.g., Christian mourning, the lot of the martyrs, and the reward for the truly faithful, a description of paradise), it contains as part of its genre some original and idiosyncratic elements that had remained until now under-explored, i.e., the motif of laughing/smiling martyrs, God, and Jesus as a key consoling and adulating tool. It has given us the opportunity to explore the presence of laughter in Christian and non-Christian epigraphy and observe changes and continuities in norms, beliefs, and expectations about life and the afterlife expressed in these texts.⁸⁷ In this survey, one notices the idea of the smiling/laughing dead mortal as absurd among both pagans and Christians. Nevertheless, the Rostock epigram seems to play with this absurdity, turning the eschatological fear upside down. The epigram declares that the deceased is equal in virtue to the crowned and laughing martyrs and along with them is finally able to see the face of God, who meets him with a welcoming smile. The deceased too laughs contemptuously at his earthly sufferings and, in his capacity as one of the blessed, he meets Jesus in paradise. The theme of smiling martyrs is attested several times in martyrological acts. By contrast, the motif

of Jesus smiling that appears in the text does not stem from any standard textual tradition. A smiling Jesus appears in a few apocryphal apostolic narratives and in visionary literature; in most cases, the smile is meant as a friendly and reassuring gesture. We have argued that Jesus's smile can be associated here with the moment of his friendly encounter with the newly admitted martyrs in paradise. John Chrysostom tells us that the only occasion on which laughter is permissible for the good Christian is "when we see our friends we have not seen for a long time" and that "when we see any persons downcast and fearful, we may encourage them with a smile."⁸⁸ Therefore, on one level, Jesus's smile can be understood as an amicable, welcoming nod to his elect upon their arrival and, on another, as a visual manifestation of his spiritual happiness and as a reflection of paradise's eternal joy.

In a funerary, epigraphical context, both types of eschatological laughter attested here appear idiosyncratic, and indeed they are unattested elsewhere. As we have tried to show above, Christianity brought about the confessionalization of ideas about the (after)life, gradually imposing a strict code of expression in sepulchral epigraphy. In addition to the comparative material presented, the narrator's effort not to mourn in line 8 also serves as striking proof of that.⁸⁹ The appropriation of a canonical, unlaughing Jesus by theologians as a tool of moral and theological catechesis—supporting the argument that a good Christian should restrain from laughter—explains the absence of laughter in sepulchral epigraphy. And yet, in his attempts at consolation, inspired by basic religious texts and pagan epic literature, and using poetic license, the poet of the Rostock epigram puts laughter in the mouth of the dead by comparing his lot in the afterlife to that of the exemplary figures of the martyrs, and a smile on the face of Jesus and God by adding a visual and physical perspective to

86 Merkt, "Schweigen," 47–49, 59–62; and Dresken-Weiland, "Tod," 150–53, 214–16, 218–20. See also Cyprian, *Ep.* 15.3: "Abundantly blessed are they who, from your number, passing through these footprints of glory, have already departed from the world; and, having finished their journey of virtue and faith, have attained the embrace and the kiss of the Lord, to the joy of the Lord Himself."

87 A strand that has not been followed more closely here is the question of whether Jesus's smile might be an allusion to a smiling emperor. Seemingly, the emperor did not smile during most of the ceremonial activities, but see Corippus, *In Laudem Iustini Augusti Minoris* 2.305. A. Cameron, *Flavius Cresconius Corippus: In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris* (London, 1976), 173, deems that smile "a little ill-chosen. . . . But the smile of the emperor is more than a natural reaction. It is part of his imperial calm." She refers to Paulus Silentarius, *Descriptio Sanctae Sophiae* 245–46, 1004, as closely related. See also C. Rollinger, *Zeremoniell und Herrschaft in der Spätantike: Die Rituale des Kaiserhofs in Konstantinopel* (Stuttgart, 2024), 395, 622, n. 65.

88 *In ep. Hebr.* 15.4 (PG 63:122). For a comparable opinion from Basil, see above, n. 38.

89 See also a case where thoughts of suicide expressed on a tombstone after the death of a beloved husband are averted out of fear of the judgment of Christ: G. B. De Rossi, *Inscriptiones christianae urbis Romae septimo saeculo antiquiores*, vol. 2, pt. 1 (Rome, 1888), 4226 (fourth century); and Dresken-Weiland, "Tod," 102–3. On suicide as an eligible option to end life in classical antiquity, see H. Brandt, "Der Tod als Gradmesser des Lebens: Inschriften, Papyri und die Bedeutung von antiken Lebenslaufkonzepten," *Hermes* 147.2 (2019): 176–188, at 181.

the beatific vision and the paradisiacal state. Believing that the beloved departed was enjoying all the pleasures of paradise, including seeing a smiling Christ face-to-face, would no doubt have offered solace to the living.⁹⁰ Perhaps, one might suppose, the poet even sought to put a bitter smile on the faces of passersby, who shared the basic beliefs about the Christian afterlife and knew the stories of the martyrs and the saints.⁹¹

90 Basil (*Grat. act.* 4.7; PG 31:228) and Gregory the Great (*Moralia in Job* 8.52.88) are careful to point out that the laughter of the blessed in paradise implied in Job 8:21, Matt. 5:4, and Luke 6.21 is meant to be inner joy, not the sound that comes out of the mouth.

91 See *charmolype* (χαρμολύπη) in later texts: Hinterberger, “Messages,” 132–33, 141.

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